

Remembering Joan Boorstein

A Special Supplement to the Viola da Gamba Society-New England Newsletter, December, 2019



President Anne Legêne's September letter to members

The board of directors recently received the very sad news that our faithful board member and former president of the society, Joan Boorstein, passed away suddenly and unexpectedly in June. She had a private funeral, and no obituary was issued.

Joan's absence will be very much felt in our little world of viola da gamba and early music lovers. As board members remembered, she was at every concert, every Conclave, ever so many workshops and playing sessions. Rain or shine, snow or ice,

she was there to hear or participate in whatever music was being presented and to support her fellow musicians. Besides her devotion to the instrument, to our chapter and the national society, Joan always showed an amazing generosity, lending instruments, hospitality, and rides to the airport whenever needed. She also maintained an important e-mail notification list, sending out concert and workshop announcements to the wider Boston area early music community.

Our society will honor Joan's life with a memorial concert, which likely will involve her friends and colleagues from near and far. You will certainly hear more about this as preparations progress. Joan's son and daughter are working with the VdGSA on a short biography which we hope to share with you as well.

Joan's family requests that the privacy of the family be respected, and all correspondence be directed to her daughter Alexa (Boorstein) Albrecht and son Michael Boorstein.

Memories from New England and Beyond

Joan was one of the first viol players I met when I moved to the Boston area in 1980.

At the time I had done a fair amount of continuo playing but was new to consort music. My introductions to all the "usual suspect" consort composers - Lawes, Jenkins, Gibbons, Byrd, you name them - seemed to involve her. There were years

when it seemed I was playing weekly with her, sometimes more than weekly.

Regardless of what was going on in a playing session, Joan was always chatty and cheerful, happy to schmooze, happy to stop schmoozing and get back to work. I can still see her sitting there, instrument in hand, diet soda cocooned in an insulating jacket by her chair, laughing and smiling.

If she was critiqued for something (“I think you’re rushing...”), she would simply try to fix it. She never argued or threw blame around, never growled, never engaged in “viol excuses” (e.g. “it’s because the floor is crooked”). I never heard her say an unkind word about another player.

As the years went by she became less comfortable playing bigger instruments and started to restrict her playing to tenor and treble, but she was always one of those players who could be relied on to come to playing-for-fun sessions whenever she could. Bigger groups, smaller groups, mixed instrument groups, different eras of early music, she could be counted on to be there.

Ruth Markowitz, another of our members who has passed on, started an annual session of playing the Bach Brandenburgs on viols and Joan was a regular member of that crew too.

She was a supporter of early music as a listener as well as a player - one could count on seeing her in the audience at early music concerts, smiling, really paying attention, generally cheering everyone on.

Joan and I also shared the joys and travails both of teaching at a college and graduate school level, and of having grown children with lives of their own, so we often talked

about those things too. She was such a presence in my life that I thought she would always be there. Not so. She will be very sorely missed.

__Mai-Lan Broekman

Joan’s sudden absence makes the memory of her vibrant personality all the more felt. It is hard to imagine that we will not see her again at a concert, a workshop, or all the places where the viola da gamba is celebrated. She embodied the Spirit of Gambo, full of vitality and humor with an unequalled devotion to the instrument we all love. She was at the center of the VdGS-NE for so many years and will be remembered fondly by all of us who knew her.

__Laura Jeppesen

I always appreciated Joan’s efforts to get together, often for a performance opportunity of some sort. Many years ago, we put together an ambitious concert, “Humorous Divisions”, which featured music of Hume, Simpson and Jenkins. We were fortunate to have the ethereal assistance of Janet Haas, Paul Johnson and Margaret Angelini.

Other events that Joan and I took on included a Wieland Kuijken masterclass (we played a Jenkins duet), performing at the VdGS-NE 20th anniversary (Ford duos in lyra tuning) and Book I G major suite of Marais for an IBIL masterclass. Our most recent performance was for the Lawes-a-thon at Longy School of Music; assisted by Alastair Thompson, we performed a Lawes fantasia-suite and the g minor duet for two basses, rarely heard. In addition, Joan was always eager to come and play consorts, sharing her experience and sensitive bowing, for holiday gatherings as well as many other ad hoc occasions. We will miss her very much.

__Hannah Davidson

It is difficult to process the fact that we have lost two wonderful members of our VdGS-NE family within such a short span of time, first Janet and now Joan. We're all so sad that Joan just vanished from our lives with no warning, no saying goodbye, no telling her how much we all appreciate her. She was so brilliant, so devoted to music and to the viol. Whenever I attended an early music concert, Joan was inevitably there - rain or shine, snow or ice - she was there to hear whatever music was being presented and to support her fellow musicians. Cheerful, wise, and level-headed, she was an invaluable member of the VdGS-NE Board. We will all miss her.

__Rosalind B. Stowe

I have been remembering the lively times when we all sat down together to read, and Joan was so much part of those evenings, as were Chester Pearlman and Ruth Markowitz. Those times were my introduction to the friendship of the society and kindness of its long-time members to newcomers. Joan was most kind and understanding — I can hear her explaining some term to me that was unfamiliar, then smiling self-deprecatingly. She will always be remembered for her thoughtfulness.

__Jean Twombly

I first met Joan in the early 1980's at one of those wonderful summer workshops at Castle Hill in Ipswich. I recall sitting on the porch of beloved Brown Cottage (now a fancy B&B), chatting with her, admiring the needlepoint she was doing between classes, and swatting those killer green flies. Although I'd been a cellist since childhood I was not yet playing viol — I'd come to Castle Hill to sing, dance, and maybe play recorder. It was Joan who inspired me to sign up for *Beginning Viol* with Jane Hershey when I had a free period. (The other choice would have been *Beginning Shawm* — I was briefly

tempted, but better sense prevailed.) In the ensuing years I became totally immersed in the VdGS-NE, attending workshops, concerts, and playing as much as I could, often with Joan. Being relatively new to the viol, I benefitted greatly from her friendship, her experience and encouragement.

One memorable evening was September 11, 2001, when Joan convened five of us to play all of the Dowland Lachrimae Pavans. We played at the Davidsons', and it was a somber yet somehow healing experience. A happier occasion was the VdGS-NE's 25th Anniversary Project: a recording of the complete Ferrabosco II four-part fantasias, in May, 2002. Our consort, consisting of Joan, Jill Wolhandler (who also is no longer with us), Todd Gilman, and myself, was ably coached by Sarah Mead. This project remains one of the highlights of my (amateur) musical career.

I frequently encountered Joan at concerts, and in addition to the music we enjoyed sharing nerdy math/computer-science stuff, such as strategies for solving Sudoku puzzles.

Others have commented on Joan's generosity. Most recently, when I decided that I needed a new challenge and began to learn to play the pardessus, Joan kindly lent me hers, a lovely instrument made by Peter Tourin.

Joan was such a prominent presence in our community — I find it almost inconceivable that she is gone. Her sudden departure, without warning, from this world has affected me deeply; she is someone whom I will never forget.

__June Matthews

She had a big heart, was funny and such a dedicated gambist!

__Berit Strong

It seems hard to imagine the New England viol community without Joan Boorstein. She was a fixture when I joined in the late 80s, welcomed me into her home when I joined the board in the early 90s, and gave generously of her help and advice when I was VdGS-NE president in the late 90s.

I moved away in 2005, but seeing Joan at Conclave in recent years always brought fond recollections of my beloved New England viol community. She will be sorely missed by this New England ex-pat.

A seminal moment in my life occurred courtesy of Joan. At the 2015 Conclave, Janet Haas won the opportunity to play the two Barak Norman viols in residence that year, and one was Joan's. Janet generously shared this opportunity with me, and we had fun playing duos and trading the viols back and forth. Joan also had with her the first - original edition of Simpson she owned. I had the divine pleasure of playing the G major division from her original Simpson, on her old viol. It was like time travel and a visit from a divine being, all at once. Thank you, Joan, for sharing your riches and making it possible for me to have such a momentous experience.

__Tracy Hoover

I didn't know Joan well enough to have any stories to tell but I loved the service/gift she provided to us, lovers of early music, by sending out announcements about upcoming concerts. This was a gift not only for those who want to know about local concerts but also for musicians, advertising their programs. I hope that somebody in the early music community will be able and willing to

take this on and continue disseminating this important information.

__Rachel Schwarz

I first met Joan at the Wagner College workshop that the NY Consort of Viols hosted on Staten Island. It was my introduction to the New England viol community, and Joan was a welcoming and enthusiastic presence, organizing late-night playing and my first experience with lyra-viol duos.

When I began teaching at Brandeis, Joan became the backbone of my fledgling ensemble, and for years she supported my student players with her steady musicianship and knowledge of the repertoire. Her booming voice and unfettered way of speaking belied the elegance of her treble sound, which served as a model of refinement to other players.

Her generosity of spirit was a model, too. She was quick to lend her time, her home, her music, and her instruments, to offer rides to local workshops and transport of materials to distant Conclaves. I will never forget the night she came to my door at my very first Conclave to offer her assistance: I had arrived in Memphis, nervous and anxious and eight months pregnant, to find that my luggage had been lost by the airline. News of my plight had gotten around, and Joan - realizing that few people were in a position to lend clothing to someone in my condition - came to my door with an armful of options, stating with simple good humor that she appreciated I might be too shy to ask.

The New England Chapter and the greater VdGSA was enriched by Joan's presence, and we will never be quite the same without her.

__Sarah Mead

We write as the grateful children of Joan Carol Boorstein, who passed away earlier this year. Our family is deeply thankful for the kind notes and remembrances that have come from Mom's wonderful viol family--including Mary Springfels, who may have known Mom for longer than any other viol player. Special thanks to Anne Legene and Jane Furth for their efforts in the VdGSNE and VdGSNA organizations to communicate with members and compile remembrances.

Born in 1942, Mom grew up in San Francisco with her parents and two brothers. From an early age, she showed exceptional intellectual capacity and a strong sense of independence, forging her own path. Her sister-in-law frequently recalls how she won nearly every academic award in high school. She attended Reed College, graduating in 1963 with a degree in mathematics.

After graduating from Reed, Mom moved east for graduate school, beginning a Masters program at Harvard in chemistry. It was there she met our father, who was a graduate teaching assistant in her chemical quantum mechanics course. They were soon married, in 1964, and moved to southern California. Her daughter Alexa was born in 1968, her son Michael in 1972--just weeks before the family moved to Newton, MA, where she would reside for the rest of her life.

Nobody in our family can recall exactly when, where, or how Mom became interested in early music (certainly some VdGS-NE/VdGSA readers know more than we do in this regard), but we know that by the mid-1960's she had developed an intense interest in and strong talent for playing the viola da gamba. Though the timing of events may be uncertain, the memories of her family and music friends are crystal clear

regarding her passions: the two things she treasured and was most devoted to were her children and viol music. We were very fortunate to have had such a loving and dedicated mother, and we are eternally appreciative of the decades of friendship and personal development given to her by the early music community.

Living in the Boston area, Mom quickly became ensconced in the local early music scene. We have clear early childhood memories of those strange people carrying big cases with instruments up the creaky stairs in our old 3-story Victorian house to the amazing, light-filled top floor where they played. We were surprised and excited when she got a harpsichord, and secretly delighted when our cats would gently walk on the keys late at night. There were the occasional overnight stays of visiting musicians--now we know that some of them were some of the most accomplished players in the world.

At some point in the late 1970s or early 1980s, Mom also began taking computer science courses at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. Her rapid and obvious mastery of this subject (in which she was surely one of the few female students) led to the University immediately offering her a teaching position, which began her more than four decades of service as a professor of computer science and math. Thus, the crowded third floor of our home became a nearly-overstuffed repository of instruments, printed music and music books, audio equipment, math and computer text books--and even, for a time, piles of computer punch cards. We recall her coding for the cutting-edge VAX and PDP digital computers, and being the first family we knew that had a home network connection (1.2k bps modem to connect to the mainframe, using the rubber "ear cups"--we

had to quickly hang up the house phone when she was “dialed in to school”). Mom even learned ADA, the complex computer coding language named for Ada Lovelace, one of the world’s first computer programmers and perhaps the first female in computer science.

She spent the ensuing decade raising and supporting her children, teaching thousands of students, and growing the local and national viol community through playing, mentoring young viol musicians, and serving in key roles in the viol organizations. (Parenthetical note: if any readers have access to recordings of her playing, please contact Mike Boorstein at michael.boorstein@gmail.com).

As we grew up, finished college, started careers, and then families, Mom continued her teaching and music. Summertime was almost always guaranteed to bring a visit or two from her as she traveled around the US for music gatherings. She enjoyed new places and experiences with the purpose of pure enjoyment of wonderful music with new and old friends.

When we were children, we didn’t fully appreciate the special nature of Mom’s music, her talent, or the people she played with; it just seemed like a strange hobby that nobody else we knew shared. But as we became professionals and parents ourselves, we realized that her musical gifts and the community she loved so much were extraordinary. But, we no longer had the privilege of listening to rehearsal in the upstairs of our home, as we had when we were kids. Michael was very fortunate to have attended, with his son, a rehearsal session at a lovely house in Arlington, VA only a few years before Mom died--it is a treasured memory, along with the recollection (memorialized in video) of

Mom letting her grandson carefully bow a few notes while Mom held her tenor viol. She passed away suddenly on June 10th, 2019.

We hope that some of these memories resonate with the many readers who knew her--we know that she positively impacted so many people we have never met. Our thanks to all who shared music and friendship with her; let her memory make us all enjoy a warm smile and laugh, like those wonderful smiles and laughs that she shared with each of us.

Michael Boorstein
Alexa (Boorstein) Albrecht